Nov 1960

Again I must ask you to forgive me if I have written too boldly, but believe me, it is humbly sincere and with Christian love.

Very sincerely yours,
Martin Luther King, Jr.
MLKm

TLC. MLKP-MBU: Box 21.

Interview by Zenas Sears
on "For Your Information"

[6 November 1960]
Atlanta, Ga.

Two days before the presidential election, Atlanta radio station WAOK broadcasted King's reflections on the candidates and his recent arrest. In this transcript of an audio recording of the interview, King rejects the suggestion that he has a "martyr complex," explaining: "I don't enjoy suffering and I don't have any desire to die."

[Sears]: This is Zenas Sears, program director of radio station WAOK. The program is "For Your Information." The opinions expressed on this program are those of the individual expressing them and not necessarily those of the radio station. Today, we are recording this program before broadcast time in the office of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., co-pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church here in Atlanta and president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. I hope I got that full title of the Conference out properly, Reverend King. I

[King]: Yes, that is exactly right.

[Sears]: It's, as your staff has expressed to me a couple times, rather a mouthful, but I think we're beginning to get it right now. [laughs]

[King]: Right.

[Sears]: Very nice for you to let us come and talk with you. There's some burning questions on the minds of many people in this country, I'd say a great majority of the country, and we hope that maybe you'll be kind enough to answer a few of those questions for us today. In reading the paper, in, where your name has

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1. King's interview was recorded sometime between 28 October and 4 November ("Dr. King Airing Views on Rights," Atlanta Constitution, 4 November 1960).

2. Zenas Sears (1913-1988), born in Akron, Ohio, was a radio announcer and disc jockey who helped introduce African American music to Atlanta radio in the late 1940s. Sears, who received a B.S. (1936) from Johns Hopkins University, worked at several Atlanta stations before purchasing WATL in 1954 and renaming it WAOK. His support of both black music and SCLC often put him at odds with his employers, public officials, and the Ku Klux Klan. Sears also promoted the careers of many Georgia rhythm and blues artists, including Ray Charles, James Brown, and William "Piano Red" Perryman (Dr. Feelgood).
been so constantly in print in the last few days [telephone rings] and talking to people, it seems that one of the main questions, particularly in the area of the white moderate, if you, the mass of white citizens who may or may not be sympathetic, basically, with the cause espoused by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, are disturbed over the, over the method used of breaking the law, various laws. And we’d like to ask you why it is necessary to break the law rather than to use the legal or lawful methods of picketing, boycotting, especially in regard to the business, restaurants in businesses?

[King]: Well, I would say, first, that when one moves into the whole question of breaking the law it brings up a very broad discussion because, first, in some situations, picketing is law-breaking. There are states and there are communities that have made laws against picketing. In Montgomery, Alabama, I was indicted and later convicted on the basis of what they call the anti-boycott law, so that even boycotting may be unlawful in some situations. Therefore, I take the general position, following the words of Saint Augustine centuries ago, that an unjust law is no law at all and that a righteous man has a moral obligation to stand up and courageously protest against an unjust, man-made law in order to bring the law in line with the moral law of the universe. If a man-made law is in conflict with what one’s conscience reveals is a law of God, or the moral law of the universe, then he has a moral obligation, it seems to me, to break the unjust law and through self-suffering to accept whatever penalty comes. He’s not seeking to evade the law as some of the extremist groups would do. He is not seeking to defy the law, but he is in a patient, loving, nonviolent way, consciously breaking the law in order to bring the law itself in line with the moral law of the universe. And I think, as I said, this is a moral responsibility.

[Sears]: Now, I’ve heard it said, mostly by the legal mind, that this is not necessary with any law. There is a legal, there is, there are legal recourses within the Constitution of the United States to attack any law outside of actually breaking it and testing it.

[King]: Well, there are certainly legal ways to do it. One can go into court and test the validity of the law. On the other hand, it seems to me that we have to bring into the equation the whole problem of using the courts to perpetuate an unjust law and to delay the ultimate implementation of a just law. Now, this is what we have seen in the South a great deal. The delaying tactics, the snail-like pace, for instance, of the implementation of the Supreme Court’s decision is something that we are all familiar with, and it seems to me that the nonviolent, direct-action approach is one way that one can at least counteract this delaying method that is so often used by the reactionaries in the white South. As the attorney general of Georgia said on one occasion, “We are prepared for a century of litigation.” Now, I think he’s quite true in stating that, that they would try to stall this whole issue a century through the litigation process. But the virtue of the nonviolent, direct-

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5. Eugene Cook was Georgia’s attorney general from 1945 until 1965.
action approach is that it brings the issue directly to the center of community life, and it causes all people to at least look the issue squarely in the face and make some decision, for or against, but at least they are forced to the position of having to decide and seeing the issue first hand.

[Sears]: Now, you have, of course, in your discussions of the nonviolent method, direct-approach method have followed Gandhi, Mahatma Gandhi of India, whose course is now quite a person in history. And we forget that when he was using this method, he created, by nonviolence, a considerable amount of violence. Do you feel that this is, that this could possibly happen in your efforts?

[King]: Well, I don’t, I don’t at all throw this out as a possibility. This is always a risk that the nonviolent resister takes. He knows that violence is a possibility, but he feels justified in his course of action because the presence of injustice in society is already the presence of violence. Now, that violence, for the moment, may be lost beneath the surface, but it is still there. The presence of injustice is already the presence of potential of violence. And what the nonviolent resister does is to bring the whole issue to the surface so that society can be rid of all violence, and he feels justified in doing this because he’s willing to absorb himself whatever violence emerges in the situation. So if any violence emerges, he’s willing to take it among, upon himself. If it means being stabbed, if it means being shot, if it means his home being bombed, he takes that. His basic position is that he will never inflict violence upon another but that he will take it upon himself if it emerges in the situation.

[Sears]: We’ve had a great many people, and you’ve seen it in print of course, say that the action of the DeKalb County judge in forcing that little issue there, the traffic violation, created, at a time when it was very, very unfortunate from his point of view I would say, created more an image of the Reverend King, Martin Luther King, Jr., as a martyr almost overnight. Again, perhaps, this image has been created before, but this certainly, was this your intent when you, when this series of events started in the sit-in? Do you feel that you should become the image of the martyr in this country?

[King]: Well, I would hasten to say that I have no desire to be a martyr. I don’t have a martyr complex. I don’t enjoy suffering, and I don’t have any desire to die. I’d like to live as long as anybody. My only concern is that we solve this problem of racial injustice, which, to my mind, is one of the most difficult, if not the most difficult, problems facing our nation today. It is certainly America’s greatest moral dilemma, and my involvement in the struggle is not merely for Martin Luther King. It isn’t merely for the Negro. It is to save the soul of America and because I think the whole struggle is morally right. Now, being involved in it will inevitably bring some suffering, and I will try to take that with all of the strength and all of the power of endurance that God will give me in the process, as I constantly pray. The prayers give me the power of endurance. But the basic aim, and certainly my basic concern, is that the problem will be solved and that it will be solved in a moral way. Therefore, it is as important for me to have moral means as it is to achieve a moral end.

[Sears]: Now, along this line, may I ask you one more question? How, and I don’t mean this to sound sarcastic, but only, it is a sarcastic question in essence [laughs], but it does not come through, it comes merely through me. How can you decide which law is moral and which law is immoral?
[King]: Only on the basis of conscience. I am not as an individual, and certainly the Negro people collectively are not in a position to say they have absolute truth. I would never have any pretense to omniscience; I don’t know everything, so that one has to be guided on the question of conscience here. Now, going beyond that, it seems to me that once the individual on the basis of conscience, and conscience develops in many ways through what we consider the religious insights of the ages. And it seems to me, from a religious point of view, segregation is wrong, and all of the laws that surround segregation and perpetuate the system would inevitably be wrong if the system itself is wrong. And then just on the basis of certain humanitarian insights that come to all of us, I think it would be wrong. And sometimes the majority opinion can be right, and I think the majority of people in the United States feel that segregation is wrong. I think the majority of the peoples of the world feel this, so that all of these things tend to substantiate one in a position of conscience. And the individual goes on feeling that he’s right on that basis. But it’s possible that I’m wrong; it’s possible that the other people in the struggle for freedom and human dignity are wrong. I don’t know. Therefore, this is why I insist that we must follow moral means. We must always be nonviolent. The end is absolute, certainly. And we must also know and we must also follow means that for us are absolutely right. And I think violence is wrong, and I think nonviolence is right. Therefore, the means will be the guiding principle in all of our activities, or at least it should be.

[Sears]: Let me pin you down on one more question that comes to many people’s minds. Should there be the occasion, in Atlanta or anywhere else, where a boycott or a nonviolent action on the part of students plus yourself and your group possibly, would throw a great many Negroes out of work on a reprisal basis, would you consider this a moral action on your part if you went ahead with that particular nonviolent action? I’m making it very loose, but we’ll say that a certain store is under attack through sit-ins and you know that if the attack continues that maybe five hundred employees of that store will be thrown out of work. Is this, is your action in this case morally justified?

[King]: Now, do you mean all people working in the store or just Negro people?

[Sears]: Just the Negro people. A definite racial reprisal.

[King]: Yes. I would say this: first, the nonviolent resister must never be so lofty in his idealism that he doesn’t come down to earth and consider certain practical problems of strategy and certain practical everyday problems that people confront. And this to me would be a matter of comparing the relative losses in the particular situation at the moment with the possible gains for the future. Now, it’s never my desire to see people out of work, whether it’s Negroes or white people, and if it means a lot of people losing jobs I would have to look at the total situation. I do feel that if one is right as an individual and if a community is moving out on a right course, then the individuals involved must be willing to face some suffering and sacrifice. And I’ve said constantly that freedom is not free. It may mean losing some jobs. It may even mean that some of us will have to spend some time in jail or somebody may have to die in the process. But I think all of this serves to redeem the social situation because I’m absolutely convinced that unearned suffering is redemptive, whether it’s losing a job or whether it’s suffering in another way. So it would depend, to answer the question, on my analysis of the situ-
ation at the moment. If it means losing a few jobs here but ultimately gaining more jobs for everybody, then I would say that we should be willing to sacrifice those few jobs. Frankly, I don't have too many fears about losing jobs in any big sense. In Montgomery, for instance, we always had this threat from the white reactionaries that there would be a mass firing of Negroes.

[Sears interrupts]: There was some

[King continues]: but it never happened.

[Sears]: But it didn't. Yes.

[King]: Yes.

[Sears]: There was very little. Pardon me, sir. What time do you have, Paul? How long have we gone? I wanted to get on another subject.

[Paul?]: Just about half.

[Sears]: Just about half. Good. Oh, by the way, Reverend King, did I hear that there is definitely going to be a debate on NBC? Did they find somebody to debate with you yet?

[King]: Well, I understand only through the newspaper [Sears laughs] that Mr. Kilpatrick of Virginia, the editor of the paper in Richmond, has consented to debate me. They, we've had a hard, they've had a hard time getting anybody.

[Sears]: They sure have.

[King]: So, I don't know.

[Sears]: Mr. Grays of . . .

[King]: Mr. Kilpatrick may back out later on also.6

[Sears]: Is he the Times-Dispatch, do you recall? Is he editor?

[King]: Yes.

[Sears]: Yes.

[King]: He's editor of Times, Richmond Times-Dispatch.7

[Sears]: I noticed a reprint in the Constitution this week from the Richmond Times-Dispatch, and I don't think you two are possibly too far separated.8 I think it's, I think there's going to be some basis for understanding before the debate begins. If you recall

[King interrupts]: Well, I think so. I have been on the program before with Mr. Kilpatrick, and he's a very intelligent and enlightened man.9 While I disagree with his views on segregation, I think he's at least an intelligent segregationist.

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6. James H. Gray, editor of the Albany Herald and Georgia's Democratic Party chairman, reneged on an earlier agreement to debate King, explaining to the press that King had "violated his parole and probation of a Georgia court (and) apparently contends that state laws are not valid as they apply to him" ("Virginian to Debate Rev. King on TV," Atlanta Constitution, 2 November 1960). King reportedly suggested that Gray's refusal to debate him "may be an unconscious admission of the untenability of his position" ("King Hits Demo's Debate Refusal," Montgomery Advertiser, 1 November 1960).

7. Kilpatrick was editor of the Richmond News Leader.

8. On 3 November the Atlanta Constitution printed a short editorial from the Richmond Times-Dispatch criticizing Georgia authorities for treating King "as though he were one of the FBI's 'most wanted' criminals" ("Manacles for the Rev. Dr. King," Richmond Times-Dispatch, 28 October 1960).

[Sears]: Yes, he said, as I today, he was one of the people who said, and we quote the paper: “If Dr. King could have asked for the treatment most calculated to win him sympathy, not only in the North, but in the South, this knuckle-headed performance in Georgia is precisely right.”

[King]: Oh yeah.

[Sears]: Yes, well I left Montgomery the, yesterday, and you might be amused to know that everybody’s being very self-righteous over in Montgomery. They say they never would have treated you like they did in Decatur, in Decatur, Georgia.

[laughs]

[King]: Is that so? [laughs] That’s very interesting.

[Sears]: [laughs] “Our courts never would have done that.” Well, let’s get on to the political situation. We’re right in the middle of it now, and there’s just two more days from this broadcast, well one more day [laughs], to make up our minds on the day to vote. I am not going to ask you how you’re going to vote because I also see in the paper that, possibly, you are not going to be able to vote this year.

[King]: Yes, according to the state of Alabama [Sears laughs], I won’t be able to get an absentee ballot, and I haven’t lived in Georgia long enough to vote.10

[Sears]: You moved here, you have to be here a year before you can register, I understand.

[King]: That’s right. Yes.

[Sears]: And then, of course, the registration is quite a ways off. So we’ll discount who you’re going to vote for, and let’s discuss, if we may, the civil rights platforms, platform of both parties. I just happened to notice, we’ll start off with the Democrats, if you don’t mind. [laughs] I happened to notice that Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt said she feels Senator Kennedy can bring about integration in the South much faster than the Eisenhower administration has done, and I wonder if we could take that as a starter.11 Do you agree with Mrs. Roosevelt?

[King]: Well, I would say that not only Senator Kennedy, I think the next administration will do much more, and not only will do but will be all but forced to do much more than we have seen in the last eight years. I would not hesitate to say, in all honesty I will have to say, that I don’t think President Eisenhower has given the leadership that this great problem demands. I am absolutely convinced that if we had had a very strong man in the White House on this issue many of the problems and even the tensions that we face in the South at this time would not exist.

[Sears]: Why do you say that? What could President Eisenhower have done to implement the Supreme Court decision, as I assume you’re speaking on that.

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10. After King announced his plans to vote absentee in Alabama, state officials informed him that he was ineligible to do so because of unpaid Alabama poll taxes (“King Loses His Vote in Alabama,” Atlanta Constitution, 3 November 1960).

11. In April Roosevelt criticized President Eisenhower “as lacking leadership on civil rights” (“Democrats Mapblank on Rights,” New York Times, 23 April 1960). A televised campaign advertisement for Kennedy, that ran in October and November, featured her endorsement: “I urge you to vote for John F. Kennedy for I have come to believe that as a president he will have the strength and the moral courage to provide the leadership for human rights we need in this time of crisis” (Eleanor Roosevelt, “The make-up of America: a majority of minorities,” October–November 1960).
[King]: Well, I think he could have done several things. First, Mr. Eisenhower came in office and he, he's still a very popular man. With that tremendous popularity, he could have used his office a great deal. He could have at least used moral persuasion to get people to see that this is the law of the land, it is morally right, and this is something that we as a nation must do in order to maintain our position in the world. Just constantly counseling the nation on the moral implications involved and the moral values involved in the whole integration struggle.

[Sears interrupts]: Do you think

[King continues]: would have been useful.

[Sears]: Do you think the present administration has recognized the world situation in respect to civil rights in this country—the lack of a good image in Africa and Europe and Asia? Do you think the Eisenhower administration has realized the importance of this problem?

[King]: Well, I think to a degree but certainly not enough. I don't think we've had enough vigorous action from the present administration to, at least, cause people in Asia and Africa to be convinced that we are serious in our determination to do away with segregation and discrimination in all of their dimensions.

[Sears]: Do you feel that the Democratic Party with the, under Kennedy will make progress in this line?

[King]: As I said, I think in the new administration will naturally do more. I don't know how much Senator Kennedy would do, but I'm sure he would take a pretty forthright position. I have talked with Senator Kennedy twice since the nomination about civil rights, and I was very impressed with his intelligence and, on this problem, his understanding of the problem and his honesty in discussing it, and I think he would take a pretty forthright position. He doesn't hide it; he's made it clear in the campaign that there is a great deal that the president can do and that he intends to use the weight of his office to get behind the struggle for civil rights and to mobilize forces in the nation for implementation of the Supreme Court's decision on desegregation.

[Sears]: Have you talked to Vice President Nixon since the nomination?

[King]: Not since the nomination. I have talked with him, though, at length on the civil rights issue, and there again I was impressed with his understanding of the depths and dimensions of this problem, and I feel that he would take a forthright position. Now, which man would take the stronger position, I don't know. I'm not in a position to say at this point. But I can say that I feel that both men would take a stronger stand than President Eisenhower has taken.

[Sears]: Let's get down to some practical politics starting with the first event that I'd like bring up is when vice president, or rather, the vice president nominee in the Republican Party, Mr. Lodge, promised, in essence, a Negro in the cabinet. Forgetting whether or not he can deliver his promise or whether he intended.

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14. During a Harlem campaign stop, Nixon's running mate Henry Cabot Lodge promised that the Republican administration would name an African American to the cabinet. The following day he retracted his statement prior to an appearance before a group of Virginia Republicans (Edward C. Burks,
to promise it or whatever, what effect do you think this statement and the resulting publicity has had with the Negro vote?

[King]: Well, frankly, I think there has been a little too much disagreement in the Republican ranks on this question and a little too much double talk to really strongly influence Negro voters. I feel that if there had been unity and agreement between Mr. Nixon and Mr. Lodge on this, and if it had been followed through, if Mr. Lodge and Mr. Nixon had made this clear and stated it in the South as well as the North, I believe that it would have strongly influenced Negro voters. But at the present time with all of the double talk and some of the developments that have taken place since the statement was made, I don’t believe many Negro voters have been moved by this point alone.

[Sears]: You think it has been a reverse effect?

[King]: Well, I don’t know if it has hurt the party as far as Negro voters go, but I don’t think it has helped it tremendously. I don’t think there had been any great gains as a result of it.

[Sears]: Mrs. Roosevelt said, also, last evening that Senator Kennedy appeared to be ignorant about the importance of the Negro vote early in the campaign but that he has shown great interest in civil rights in recent weeks. Of course she’s talking, I think, primarily about his interest and the Kennedy campaign interest in your problem. Do you think that interest has affected Kennedy’s chances with the Negro vote, as such?

[King]: Well, I have no doubt that Senator Kennedy has gained a great deal in recent weeks, not only with Negro voters but with voters generally.

[Sears]: Why?

[King]: He, well, he has made a very impressive presentation, several impressive presentations on television in the debates, and I think more and more he has demonstrated a good deal of courage. Now, there were some people who had doubts about Senator Kennedy’s courage from the beginning, including Mrs. Roosevelt (Yes), which was (Yeah) one thing that she strongly stated before the convention—that Senator Kennedy lacked courage. But I think more and more he has demonstrated a great deal of courage, and this has been impressive. He has spoken to the issues in a very articulate manner, and he has made it clear that he would be a strong president in many areas. Now, on the civil rights issue, I think he has taken a much more forthright stand within recent weeks than he did before the nomination or right after it.

[Sears]: Do you think that’s practical politics, vote-getting, or is it sincere?

[King]: Well, this is something that I wouldn’t be able to say. I guess it’s this...
whole question of human motives. It's something [Sears laughs] (Yeah) that we (Yes) just can't, we can't answer. (Yeah) I would hope that it's sincere. [Sears laughs] Sometimes a thing can be expedient and morally right at the same time. And I do think it's rather expedient to take this position because in many of the large, urban, industrial areas the Negro vote is a very important vote, possibly the balance of power. So this may be the expedient course, but I think it's right, and sometimes in history the expedient and the right way tend to join hands.

[Sears]: Yes. I think you said that rather clearly in the first part of our interview. The congressman Adam Clayton Powell described Democratic vice presidential nominee Lyndon Johnson as “a great man of the South and the surprise hit of the campaign.” Dr. Powell spoke in Detroit and praised Johnson for directing the 1960 civil rights bill and for opposing what he called a “Dixie-crat manifesto.”16 I think such a statement by Congressman Powell, if anybody before the nomination of Senator Johnson, if anybody'd said that Reverend Powell would have come out for Senator Johnson at this time it would be a little surprising. How, what do you feel about that and about Johnson in general?

[King]: Well, I have, what I should say I had certain doubts, and I was certainly disappointed when Senator Johnson was nominated to run for vice president. But I, being a minister, I guess I will have to believe in the possibility of being converted and [Sears laughs] regenerated, and I hope Senator Johnson has changed at many points. Now, he has done some good things, but he’s been a very shrewd maneuverer, and I think at times he has compromised basic principles. There is no doubt about the fact that he has not been a strong civil rights man, and yet, he hadn’t been the reactionary. Now, I think more and more Senator Johnson will take a strong position. I think he took the nomination in order to become an American rather than a Texan with the sectional yoke of the South. And I believe more and more he will move toward liberal positions on the Negro question, on labor questions, and other things.17

[Sears]: That's very interesting. I, we have sort of run out of time here, and I'm going to ask you just one more question, sir. And that is, would you be willing to sort of say who you think will win the election two days from now? Have you a good prognostication?

[King]: Well, I'll tell you the truth, I have, I just don't have the political astuteness or the ability of the prognosticator at this point [Sears laughs] because I think there are so many intangible factors that it's very difficult. The religious issue's there, and it's a very important issue.

[Sears]: Yes.

[King]: And there are still undecided voters, more than probably before, so that it's just difficult to say. I think it will probably be a close election and, at least from the popular votes, and I just find it difficult to make any prediction at this point.

[Sears]: I think you're one of the few smart people in the United States. Everybody else has predicted at this time, except you and I, and off the air I am predict-

17. See Lyndon B. Johnson to King, 28 November 1960, p. 565 in this volume.
ing, but I won’t say who. I want to thank you very much, sir. This program today has featured Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., co-pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church and president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. This is Zenas Sears, program director of radio station WAOK. The program has been “For Your Information.” The opinions expressed on it were those of the individual and not necessarily those of the radio station. Again, our thanks to our guest, one of the busiest man in United States today, for taking this half hour with us.

At. MLKEC: ET-35.

From L. Harold DeWolf

15 November 1960
Boston, Mass.

DeWolf suggests that Kennedy’s role in King’s release from prison was “decisive” in the presidential election. He also requests that King call him and his wife, Madeleine, by their first names: “I am sure that the respect which you feel for me as your old teacher cannot exceed the respect bordering on reverence which I feel for you.”

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
Ebenezer Baptist Church
407-413 Auburn Avenue, N.E.
Atlanta 12, Georgia

Dear Martin,

Thank you for your letter of November 2nd.1 Madeleine and I are sorry that your coming trip to Boston must be in such a rush, but, of course, we understand your many responsibilities are heavy in these days.

Recently I had the great pleasure to meet for a few minutes of conversation Coretta’s sister, Edith.2 Incidentally, although I know her first name and know that she was a Scott before her marriage, I should appreciate a note from you or Coretta, telling me her last name. I am much embarrassed in having forgotten it, and I want to get in touch with her again. If you have her present residential address, I should also be grateful for that. I know that she is studying in the School of Fine and Applied Arts.

It is one of the ironies of these times that the action of a judge in Atlanta, expressing his hostility to you and the cause which you represent, may have deter-

1. In the letter King had declined his dissertation advisor’s invitation to stay at his home during an upcoming visit to Boston.
2. Edythe Scott Bagley attended Boston University intermittently from January 1957 until August 1965, when she was awarded an M.F.A. degree.